

TV

Homicide: Life
on the Street
Fridays, 10 p.m., NBC

We watch a tiny TV with lines running through it. We are ordered to shush to watch a cop show.

It's the characters. They make us sit, rapt, every week: even dead characters from previous seasons are more interesting than the live ones on *NYPD Blue* or *Law & Order*.

We watch them at work in their Baltimore detective squad room: Captain Giardello (Yaphet Kotto, of the moving hairline), and his detectives—Kay Howard (Melissa Leo, who did more in previous seasons . . . can't we get her back into crispy suits, and give her something to say besides "I'll get right on it, Cl"?), Tim Bayliss (Kyle Secor—last season he had sex in a coffin; this year he has a creepy haircut), Munch (Richard Belzer as Richard Belzer, more or less), Lewis Melndrake (Clark Johnson, who says *PO-leece* with such verve), Mike Kellerman (Reed Diamond—is he waiting for a sitcom?).

They're swell, but the real reason to watch? Frank Pembleton. The credits say he's played by Andre Braugher, but that's a lie: Frank Pembleton is alive and well and living in Baltimore! This is not some network cop blather—this is a skillfully edited home video! You watch and you'll know it's true. Frank had the most vivid end-of-season stroke ever seen on TV. Pre-stroke Frank strutted, righteous and true, never a misstep, dazzling with quickness and genius. Post-stroke Frank has struggled, questioning and doubting, using a cane, stuttering, on desk duty, ordering secretaries pizzas.

Finally, Frank is on the job again. He's returned to the interrogation box, ferociously working over suspects. He's not quite snapping, crackling and popping at maximum pre-stroke speed yet, but he is back! And he tore that tiny TV with the lines in it right up!

—ALLISON COLBY

Animal Rites

National Geographic Explorer's
"Animal Attraction"
Sunday, January 5, 7 p.m., TBS

BY MARK SCHOOFS

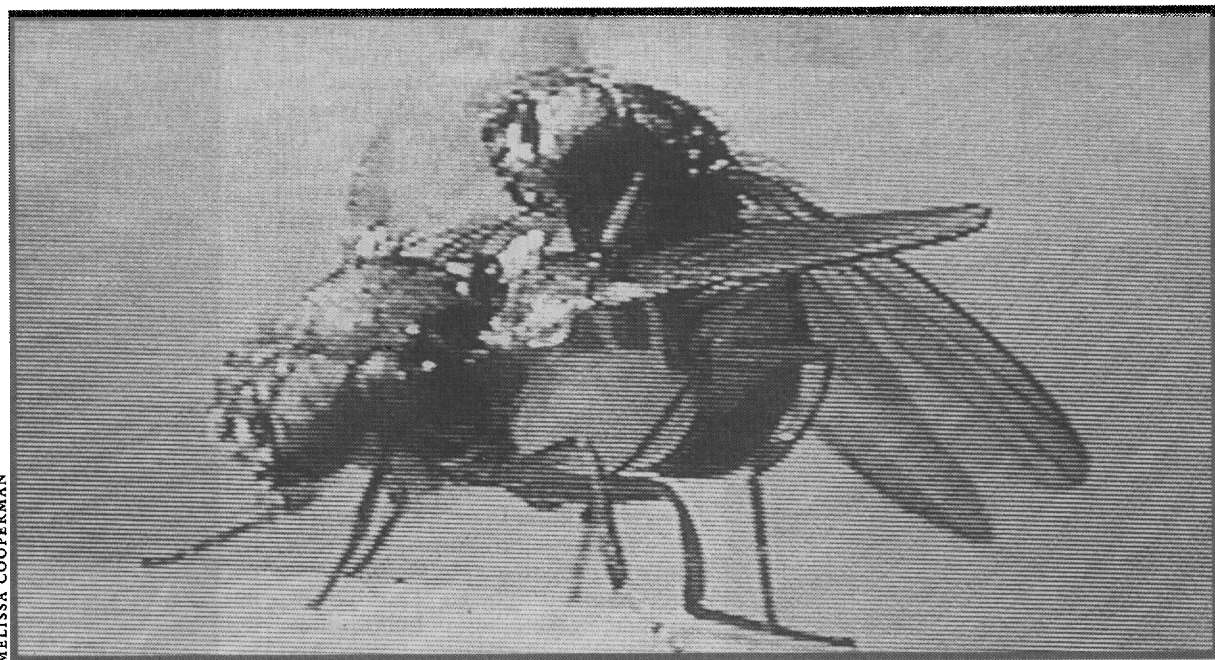
Remember *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*? Well, replace Marlin Perkins with sultry-tongued *Cybill* costar Christine Baranski, show animals fucking instead of feeding, and presto, you've got *National Geographic Explorer's* "Animal Attraction."

The show's thesis: Females, not males, determine coupling "because motherhood is costly and sperm is cheap," which makes females choosier. Especially females that happen to be fruit flies. A white-haired British professor (who confides that he "can't dance and never could") explains that male fruit flies can mate five times a day, but "a female is only going to mate once in her life. She really cares."

So what do women want? To get the answer, researcher Nancy Burley set up "a peep show for finches" and recorded which males, viewed through different windows, got the distaff finches most excited. Cyrano would be happy: The favorites were males on whose heads Burley had glued tall white plumes.

When Burley moved from hats to leg bracelets, red ruled and green was a turnoff. "It definitely is a handicap and a stress to males who are green-banded in our experiments," sympathizes Burley, "and I do get a little bit of a lump in my throat whenever I have to assign a green color band to the male." (Wait: "Have to assign"? Who's forcing Burley to condemn these finches to lives of loneliness?)

Scorpion flies (whose copulating



Flies just want to have fun: *National Geographic Explorer's* "Animal Attraction."

is unimaginably grotesque) get turned on by symmetry. Apparently, so do humans. Researchers took photos of men's faces and had women rate them. Then a computer measured facial balance and, *quel surprise*, women preferred symmetrical miens. In fact, as the screen fills with a pornographic pan of a hairless male torso, the narrator says, definitively, "More-symmetrical men stimulate more sexual arousal during mating than less-symmetrical men." Now, how did they do that experiment? The show doesn't say.

But it does assure us that "it is not a leap at all to talk about humans in relation to scorpion fly behavior," as scientist Randy Thornhill says. "It is all a matter of biology." Hmmm. In assessing faces, the computer gave lower

numbers for higher symmetry, and our philandering president scored particularly well: 2.8. But I wanted the phone number of the lopsided fellow who scored a dismal 7.3.

Maybe that's 'cause I'm a homo. Any queers—or even girls who just want to have fun rather than perpetuate the species—won't learn much about themselves from "Animal Attraction." This is curious, given the ink that publications such as *Time* and the *Times* have spilled over those fruity fruit flies. Remember that story? If a single gene is altered, then male fruit flies will hump one another instead of females. (Scientists named this gene fru, which is an abbreviation for—I am not making this up—fruitless.)

Animals certainly can teach us about making whoopee, probably even non-procreative whoopee. But unless we look through—or just laugh at—the assumptions science and the media erect around sex, we'll turn off the TV feeling bewitched, bothered, and bewildered.

Committed viewers are beginning to wonder if star-executive producer Garry Shandling—who's always been ambivalent about the show anyway—is pushing the scripts toward the program's demise. It's like a character being written out of a soap opera, only in this case it's the lead.

Here's the evidence, four shows into the season:

Episode one: In the opening scene, a network executive discussing Jon Stewart's fill-in role tells Larry's producer that "when Jon Stewart's contract with Worldwide Pants expires, he will be able to go to any network he wants, and we want him here." The producer asks: "You mean to go on after Larry?" Silence—except for the echoes of the *Late Shift* coup.

Episode two: Network brass go nuts when cohost Hank Kingsley dons a yarmulke and begins quoting the Talmud during the show. "We've already heard from our sponsors. . . . They simply do not feel it's appropriate. . . . We're under a lot of pressure right now."

Episode three: The plot revolves around a nasty review the show gets from critic Tom Shales.

Episode four: Discussing where the show should go for its road trip, Larry offers his producer a choice between hell and Hawaii. When he observes that they'd get better numbers in Hawaii, Larry responds: "If we had better numbers, we wouldn't need to go on the road."

No one thinks this anxiety in the show-within-the-show is a reflection of what's going on with the show. *The Larry Sanders Show*, in real life, still gets good reviews, and HBO would probably lose half its subscribers if it tried to bump Shandling and friends. But could it be that Shandling wants out, and this is an artful way of keeping his options open? "I'm not aware of any plot point that's being led up to," says a helpful HBO publicist. "I think maybe it's a reflection of the late-night industry in general." Hmmm . . . sounds like something Larry's publicist would say.

Miracle Workers

Could It Be a Miracle
Monday, 12:20 a.m., CBS

BY COREY
SABOURIN

There are miracles—the absence of citywide tenant riots following state senate Republican rent destabilization decrees—and then there are *Could It Be a Miracle* miracles: good people in harm's way and no arrears with the big landlord upstairs.

Upfront, *Could It Be a Miracle* dispels viewers' apprehension of a late-night TV ministry. New Age infomercial, or worse, another show about angels. Host-producers Bob B. Evans and Michele Wolford are semistylish thirtysomethings stretching for news desk collegiality à la Barbara and Hugh. There's also the oh so credible Miracle Research Center studio set, located in my mind next-door to the Ponds Institute and Burger King University.

But hold on—the reenactments are actually entertaining. Lo, the hand of God is putting up roadway hospital signs for an RV full of lost vacationers with a sick child on board; a harried mom's station wagon is "stopped" before her little girl can be crushed under its wheels; a deceased boyfriend "shouts" a warning to his girlfriend from the other side; and, in one memorable high-frequency miracle, an injured hiker's radio "tunes in" a broadcast of life-saving medical advice!

A stable of miracle expert-authors—who provide many of the stories—play our heartstrings like scientific instruments to "verify" these remarkable events (I'm a believer). And while *Could It Be a Miracle* is nowhere near as heart-racing as the retired reenactment program *Rescue 911*, while watching you may, like me, start to second-guess those mysterious "coincidences" of your past. Best of all, the show's content is as secular as Christmas at the mall: finally, miracles nobody's thanking St. Jude for.

The Trouble With Larry

The Larry Sanders Show
Wednesdays, 10 p.m., HBO

BY JAMES
LEDBETTER

Is Larry Sanders planting the seeds of his own cancellation?

The fifth season of *The Larry Sanders Show*—the unique, meticulously written HBO comedy—carries a new plot burden: looming network pressure. A certain amount of showbiz angst has always leavened the stories, but this year it's become an obsession: each episode has had one or more references to bad ratings, poor reviews, managerial dissatisfaction, and staff dissension.